DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 012 HE 016 790

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TITLE From School to College. Testimony to the National Commission on Excellence in Education. (Public Hearing, Chicago, Illinois, June 23, 1982).
PUB DATE 23 Jun 82
NOTE 29p.; For related documents, see ED 227 094, HE 016 788-808, HE 016 814, and HE 016 887.
PUB TYPE Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; *Articulation (Education); College Admission; College Bound Students; *College Preparation; College School Cooperation; *Competitive Selection; *Educational Quality; Hearings; Higher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Excellence; *National Commission on Excellence in Education

ABSTRACT

Perspectives on secondary school preparation and college admissions, and specifically admissions to selective colleges, are provided. According to a 1977 Stanford University document (which is briefly summarized but not appended), there is considerable variation in the number of solid academic courses taken by high school students, and capable students appear to undertake relatively light academic programs. Admissions considerations for selective colleges are identified, and the following three criticisms of selective college admissions are discussed: (1) colleges place too much emphasis on grades and test scores and too little emphasis on personal qualities; (2) predicted success in college is not an adequate measure of predicted success in life; and (3) when colleges take "A" students and keep them "A" students, there is less value added than when colleges take "C" students and turn them into "B" students. Attention is directed to the notion that the key to improving the academic programs and performance of students is raising college admission standards. It is suggested that raising academic standards is linked to focusing resources and attention on academic programs, improving teaching conditions, attracting to schools high quality teachers, and promoting consultation between school teachers and college faculty. Concerns regarding minority students are also addressed. (SW)

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211

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20208

ED237012

"FROM SCHOOL TO COLLEGE"

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY:

FRED HARGADON
DEAN OF ADMISSIONS
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JUNE 23, 1982

HE 016 790

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From School to College

In addressing a topic as mutli-faceted and as complex as that of the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, I am reminded of one of the characters in that delightful book, The Phantom Tollbooth. He is the Dodecahedron (a mathematical shape with twelve faces) who, when introduced to someone, replies "my angles are many, my sides are not few." His reply provides an apt description of the issues before us.

In one sense, the perspective I bring to bear on the transition process is a narrow one. Of the seventeen years I have spent as an admissions dean, the first four were at Swarthmore College and the past thirteen have been at Stanford University. These are institutions which are highly selective in admissions and each attracts an applicant group which itself is characterized by a relatively high degree of self-selection on the part of the students who make it up. Too, neither institution experiences any signficant academic attrition.

In another sense, however, the perspective gained at these two particular institutions has been a broad one. Relative to the sizes of their respective freshman classes, each attracts a large applicant group. Each attracts applicants from all parts of the United States and from many countries around the world. Each has been fortunate enough to have the wherewithal to be able to select its students without regard to financial need. And each, relatively early on, initiated programs to seek out talented students from minority backgrounds which had previously been significantly underrepresented in institutions of their type. Consequently, the secondary schools from which the applicants to these two colleges come are characterized by considerable diversity. In neither institution is the selection process a matter of applying a simple formula and all applications to each are therefore read and evaluated on an individual basis. Lastly, in both institutions I have been a member of the faculty and therefore have had an opportunity to teach some of the students who gained admission.

Given both the limitations and the advantages of my particular perspective, then, I have attempted to set out below some observations about the current state of the transition of students from our schools to our colleges. Since it would be cumbersome in a document of this sort to continually modify each statement by the adjective "some," or by the phrase "in some instances," I will normally leave it out. But there is almost no instance in which such modifiers would not be appropriate.

Secondary School Preparation

For better or for worse, the window through which college admissions officers view the secondary schools is that of the high school transcripts presented by applicants for admission. The transcript is the record of courses taken and the grades achieved in those courses. While the transcript may well provide admissions officers with the best single clue in estimating how well, in general, a large group of students will perform in college, it is a far from sufficient clue in determining how a given individual student will perform at a given college. Many colleges, including all of the selective ones, seek additional evidence (e.g., test scores, essays, and teacher recommendations) with which to compliment the transcript in order to determine the best match between a student's preparation and abilities and the particular and the academic requirements of a particular college.

I suppose I have read plus or minus one hundred and thirty thousand transcripts from approximately eight thousand high schools (about a third of the high schools in the U.S.) over the years. Based upon the cumulative and comparative impressions gleaned from those readings and upon faculty perceptions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the students they teach, in 1976-77 Stanford prepared a document in which we set out a number of observations (concerns, really) about the matter of secondary school preparation for college. A copy of that document is attached and so I will only briefly outline some of the points made therein:

1. We are struck by the considerable variation in the number of solid academic courses taken by students in high school, not only among students from different high schools but among students from the same high school. There can be, and are, enormous differences in the quality and amount of work represented by otherwise identical grade point averages or even identical rank in class.

2. We are struck by the number of students who appear otherwise quite able and who attend excellent secondary schools with very ample course offerings who nevertheless take relatively light academic programs. By "light" we mean taking relatively few solid academic courses and/or ducking any of the advanced or honors courses available.

3. Apart from whether a student's academic program has been heavy or light, we are concerned about the distribution of courses taken. For instance, it appears to us there is an increasing number of schools, indeed entire school districts, where even the most capable students will have taken no foreign language since the ninth grade. Similarly, the number of students taking English and mathematics throughout high school appears on the decline.

4. Writing skills are weaker than they should be. Too few students appear to us to have been required to write much at all prior to entering college and, even for those students who did do a considerable amount of writing in high school, too few report they received the kind of sustained criticism and feedback necessary to nurture improvement.

5. Too few students appear to have had any experience with essay-type examinations before entering college.

6. Of special concern is the presumed relationship between the title of courses and their actual content. Recognizing that our students are ones who for the most part have achieved excellent records in high school, we are all the more baffled by how little by way of prior knowledge can be assumed on the part of students whose records indicate they in fact have taken specific courses in a given subject field in high school. For instance, we are no longer as confident as we once were that an English course is in fact an English course, and not simply a course devoted to one or another social policy question. Similar doubts haunt us regarding the content of many history, sociology, and government courses.

The document we prepared then goes on to make specific recommendations, complete with illustrations, about the kind of academic program students who are considering going on to college ought to take in high school.

Titled "Memorandum to Secondary Schools, Students and Parents," the document has had wide circulation (approximately fifty thousand copies have been mailed out since 1977 and requests for it arrive almost daily). With a few exceptions, the responses to it have been positive and the responses are worth mentioning briefly, if only because they point up additional concerns.

Whatever the merits of the particular recommendations we made aside, the sheer volume of requests for copies of the Memorandum (not only from individual schools, students and parents, but also from school boards and other colleges) suggests its appearance at least partially filled a vacuum we had previously been oblivious to. For too long a time colleges have simply taken it for granted that knowledge about the kind of preparation which, if not required, is at least highly desirable, was widespread. We assumed such knowledge on the part of the secondary schools and, through them, on the part of students and their parents. College catalogs impart such knowledge only to those who send for them (and among that group, only to those who read them), normally at a point in the student's high school career when it is already beyond the time when they can make up the difference between what they have taken and what the colleges desire.

Even in those schools (increasingly fewer) where there are adequate resources in the college guidance area, personnel turn over. And even the most conscientious among them , once they have mastered the sometimes complex admissions formulas of the state institutions to which the majority of their students will go, would find it difficult to digest and then interpret the different requirements and recommendations of thousands of other colleges.

Some of the responses to the Memorandum pointed out that however much a given community (schools, students and parents alike) might be in agreement with our recommendations, they simply lacked the resources necessary to meet them. The reasons are many and varied and, by now, obvious. In some cases, it is the lack of funds.

In others, it is the lack of an academic tradition in the schools. In still others it is a matter of size, or lack of qualified teachers, or lack of school board support. The reasons are in fact both believable and endless, and when one surveys the quite disparate situations in which our twenty thousand plus secondary schools find themselves in this country, one is reminded of Tolstoi's words in Anna Karenina: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It may not be too far-fetched to say that all successful schools are alike and that unsuccessful schools are unsuccessful for reasons which vary considerably from one school to another. In any event, the gap between desirable preparation for college and the lack of academi- opportunities available to students in many of our secondary schools presents those colleges who would move from recommendations to actual admissions requirements with a not insignficant dilemma. It is one thing to turn down an applicant who did not take advantage of the opportunities available; it is quite another to turn down an otherwise able student because the opportunities were simply not available.

Not unexpectedly, a few of the responses to our Memorandum termed it "elitist," suggesting it has little to say to the the great majority of their school's students who neither would nor should go on to institutions of our ilk. One respondent even went to far as to refer to our efforts as "anti-democratic." As few as responses of this type have been, I am inclined to think they represent a climate of opinion which, unhealthily, is more widespread throughout our schools than we might like to think. It is not simply a matter of pointing out, as I did in this latter instance, that it strikes me as far more democratic to begin with the notion that no individual student is incapable of mastering a first-rate academic program in high school rather than the notion that such an achievement is prerogative of only a few. It raises the matter of expectations and the role such expectations play in our schools, indeed, in education generally. If we hold high expectations of our students, surely not all of them will meet them. But just as surely, if we hold low expectations for them, that is all the great majority of them will meet. I happen to think that all teachers and counselors, at whatever levels of education, ought, as a matter of

course, to hold higher expectations for their students than they held for themselves at the same age. In other words, not only do many of our students in the schools not know, or know far enough ahead of time, what it is they ought to attempt to accomplish in order to maximize their options for postsecondary education, all too many, I believe, fall victim all too early on to unreasonably low expectations, whatever the sources of such expectations (peer group, family, schools).

Related to this matter of expectations is the question of who in a given secondary school is charged with the responsibility of guidance and of what that particular function, if it still exists, consists. This is not just a matter of colleges no longer being quite sure to whom it is in a given high school information ought to be sent, although that is increasingly a problem. (In our own neck of the woods, those who normally performed the college guidance function have been among the first to be let go when budgets have been cut back.) Rather, in many schools college guidance is what counselors perform in what little time is left after dealing with all sorts of other, generally problem-related, counseling functions. In some of even the best-funded schools, counselors have become schedule-fixers more than program advocates and the function of encouraging students to take a challenging program, where such a function exists at all, is both too dispersed and too happenstance to have more than a minimal effect.

As welcome as many found our Memorandum to be, it is also clear that at least in one sense, it could not have come at a less propitious time. Given the passage of Proposition 13 in my own state of California, and the passage of similar legislation in other states, in many parts of the country the schools have felt the effects of budget cutbacks. In many schools, the number of periods in a school day has been signficantly reduced. Not only does a shortened school day make it difficult, if not impossible, for students to achieve breadth in their academic programs, it frequently reduces the number of advanced courses (e.g., the third year of a foreign language) available and in some cases wipes out some courses at all levels (e.g., German or Latin) which generally have lower

enrollments. A shortened school day increases the likelihood that students will have to choose between a second or third year of a foreign language and physics, say.

Moreover, the difficult course choices forced by a shortened school day exacerbates the problem of what I have on occasion referred to of having the extracurricular crowding out the curricular in many schools. It is startling to at least this observer to see in how many of our schools every conceivable extracurricular activity is awarded the same amount of credit toward graduation as is any academic course. In one transcript which passed over my desk this year, almost one-half of the applicant's units toward graduation from high school (and one half of the applicant's A's I might add) were achieved in such activities as badminton, water polo, swimming, glee club, driver's education and the like. While this is perhaps the most extreme such case I have reviewed, variations of this kind of imbalance appear far too common.

Whenever I have raised concerns of the sort just mentioned in public forums, I immediately hear from one or another constituency (e.g., national associations of teachers of driver's education or of directors of student activities) taking me to task for "belittling" the development of our young in areas other than strictly academic ones. Apart from the fact that our own admissions decisions reflect a positive attitude toward students who have shown a high energy level outside as well as inside the classroom, and apart from the fact that there is ample proof around the country that students are able to take strong academic programs and learn how to drive safely or participate in athletics or in music or whatever, my sense of it is that our schools have moved less far than we might imagine in resolving the age-old conflict between those who hold their primary purpose to be that of life adjustment and those who hold their primary purpose to be that of cultivation of the mind. When, as an admissions dean, I am out on the hustings, I am frequently asked by audiences of all sorts whether we only admit students who have achieved academically or whether we also admit "well rounded" students, the implication

being that one could not possibly fall into both categories! Indeed, one is struck that even in the 1980's there is a considerable number of people, both within and without our schools, who believe that the development of the intellect, on the one hand, and on the other, the development of good character, practicality, and the like, are mutually exclusive goals. (It is profitable, I think, to reread Richard Hofstadter's Anti-Intellectualism in American Life for an historical perspective on the debate over the purposes of our schools.)

To make the transition between my observations on the matter of secondary school preparation for college and my observations on college admissions, one additional matter is worth calling attention to. This has to do with the mixed signals which the various colleges send to the schools and to their students. It is perhaps best illustrated by the situation in California. Stanford sends out the message that students should take the most rigorous and challenging courses available to them in their respective high schools, even, alas, if it means risking receiving lower grades in such courses. Students then quite appropriately ask whether following Stanford's advice does not make them run the risk of jeopardizing their chances for admission to those colleges, generally public institutions, which base their admissions selections on a formula which accords significant weight to a student's grade point average and/or rank in graduating class. The answer to that question, unfortunately, is "yes." The dilemma faced by such students in this regard is no less apparent and of no less concern to, say, the prestigious University of California (which employs just such an admissions formula according great weight to grade point average) than it has been to the rest of us.

Much to their credit, research undertaken by UC itself indicates that students frequently have chosen to take the least challenging courses available in a given subject field so as not to jeopardize their achieving the grade point average which assures their admission to UC. (For this reason among others, including the substantial funds UC has had to spend in recent years on remedial education classes for entering students who, after all, ranked in the top twelve and one-half percent of their class in high school, UC has recently announced plans to stiffen their requirements for the freshmen who will enter UC,

beginning with the class which enrolls in the fall of 1986, by which time the admissions formula will be changed to enable the University to award additional points in those cases where students have taken the most demanding and challenging courses in high school.) I do not know how common might be the "mixed signals" situation I have just described in states other than California, but given the admissions standards of our public institutions of higher education are bound to carry the greatest weight among the greatest number of our secondary schools and their students, it is an area to which the Commission ought to give significant attention.

College Admissions

It would be impossible for anyone, I think, to adequately summarize the college admissions processes in this country. Certainly it is impossible for me. There are somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 postsecondary institutions and their admissions requirements and admissions processes vary widely. Depending upon one's particular viewpoint, such differences are either a virtue or a vice. One or another compiler of college guidebooks is likely to classify institutions by whether their admissions situations are essentially open-door, mildly selective, selective, or highly selective. For the most part they are classified thusly, based on both the size and overall quality of their applicant groups relative to the size of their entering freshman classes. I happen to think the great majority of such guidebooks mislead far more often than they inform, but do not intend to belabor that particular point at this time.

Another way of classifying admissions processes is that of distinguishing between colleges which admit according to a specified formula (the University of California is a good example of such schools) and those which,while making use of guidelines, essentially admit on an individual basis.(Stanford is a good example of this latter group.) Formula colleges and non-formula colleges may be either essentially selective or essentially non-selective.

For purposes of my testimony, it is perhaps best that I speak from my own experience in admissions, all of which was gained at two very selective colleges where admissions decisions were based on careful scrutiny of individual applications. Very briefly, the tasks confronting an admissions officer in colleges such as these (and here I do presume to speak on behalf of my colleagues at numerous other similarly selective colleges) primarily consist of (a) determining to the fullest extent possible the nature and quality of an applicant's secondary school preparation, (b) determining to the fullest extent possible the academic abilities and potential of an applicant, sometimes but not always congruent with their academic preparation, (c) comparing applicants one with another on the basis of their academic preparation, abilities, and potential, (d) taking some measure of especially highly developed talents and signficant accomplishments evidenced by applicants both within and outside of the classroom, (e) taking into account the different backgrounds and life experiences of the applicants, and (f) reaching decisions about whom to admit, taking into consideration nature and pace of the college's academic program and, particularly in residential colleges, the desire to enroll a freshman class which is both able and diverse.

To do all of the above requires that we seek various kinds of evidence from several different sources. Our applications normally consist of one form to be completed by the applicants themselves, wherein the applicants tell us about their interests and accomplishments and provide us with their responses to one or more essay questions we set. Such forms are commonly referred to as "brag sheets." A second form requires submission of the secondary school transcript and any summary statements about an applicant's intellectual and other personal qualities on the part of the guidance counselor or principal. In addition, the applicant is asked to have one or two teachers of thwir own choosing from academic courses submit recommendations on the applicant's behalf. All applicants are also required to submit the results of one or another standardized national test, e.g. the SAT or the ACT and, in some cases the results of standardized national achievement tests, e.g. those offered by The College Board. In some colleges, including Stanford, students may submit art or tapes for

evaluation by the art and music departments respectively. Some colleges (not including my own) may, in addition, require and/or use the results of personal interviews.

Most of the non-formula colleges and particularly those whose applicant groups are sufficiently large to enable the college to actually select those students it admits use some variation of the admissions application I have just described. They may vary in terms of the weight they place upon any one part of the application or in terms of whether they even assign specific points to the various parts, but most would agree with me, I think, that any college application is a compromise between all of the information about a given applicant the college would like to have in hand and that which, on the one hand, it is reasonable to request from an applicant (who will most likely be applying to a number of colleges) and, on the other hand, that which can reasonably be taken into account by those evaluating the applications.

On occasion, I have described our application as a set of eight or nine hooks, perhaps ~~five~~ or six of which an applicant as yet unknown to me out there will hang his hats. Earlier in this statement, I have referred to the evidence we attempt to gather in an application as a set of clues, scrutiny of which enables us to get a "fix" on an applicant and his or her preparation, ability, potential, interests, and the like. I would hesitate to speak for other colleges in this regard, but my guess is that in the most highly selective colleges, the greatest amount of weight is placed first upon the strength of an applicant's secondary school program (number of solid courses taken, number of advanced or honors courses taken, and level of achievement in the courses), and then upon the applicant's results on one or another of the national standardized tests, and then upon an applicant's other interests and accomplishments, life experiences, background, and the like. Contrary to popular myth, test scores and grades, in and of themselves, while not insignificant, are nevertheless secondary. In short, an applicant with a high level of achievement in a first-rate academic program and only modest test scores fares better in our process than a student with high test scores

and high grades but only a modest academic program (the exception, of course, being those instances in which for such students a modest academic program wa all that was available in their high school). In all applicant groups, of course, there are always a number of students who are outstanding on every measure one might use. For the type of admissions process described here, there generally is no one "ideal" applicant. Nor, as can be easily shown by an examination of the profiles of their applicants and the profiles of their admitted students, do such colleges attempt simply to maximize the median test scores of the median grade point averages of their enrolling students. Such colleges do not (knowingly at any rate) admit students for whom they cannot predict successful completion of the college's academic program, but above that level they are willing to recognize that excellence comes in many shapes and sizes and forms and they wisely, I think, diversify their portfolios.

Admissions to such colleges are a matter of probabilities. There is certainly no guarantee that the student who enters with the most impressive academic credentials will graduate with the most impressive credentials, or that the student who enters with the least impressive credentials (comparatively speaking) will not graduate at the top of the class. But the probabilities greatly favor the former student and work against the latter one. The person credited with founding life insurance is said to have remarked that "there is nothing so unpredictable as the life of a single individual, and nothing so predictable as the lives of a thousand individuals." So, too, it has been my experience at least, with respect to entering freshman classes.

There are, of course, all sorts of criticisms which are leveled at selective college admissions. I would here comment on just three themes which have been frequently voiced in recent years. The first such theme argues that colleges place too much emphasis on grades and test scores and too little emphasis on personal qualities such as motivation, independence, creativity, integrity and character. I think the critics are off the mark on this one, not just because (as I have suggested earlier) academic achievement and praiseworthy character traits are far from being mutually exclusive, but because I think they and I

disagree on what evidence is relevant in determining the existence of just such personal traits. Not only is academic achievement frequently a signficant indicator of one's motivation, one's choices of courses to take (whether tough or easy), the manner in which one approaches learning, may also provide evidence of one's independence and character and integrity. Too often we are asked by such critics to take their word for it that a student who has evidently shwon little motivation during the first twelve years of his or her schooling is all of a sudden motivated to do well in college. Students who do well on tests are inexplicably dismissed as merely having "test-taking ability." Such charges are frequently made by the schools, which argue that the grades they dispense should carry much greater weight than the results on national standardized exminations. Even were we to ignore for the moment the problems of grade inflation and the enormous variations in grading patterns between schools, one has to wonder why, if achieving high test scores is simply a matter of something called "test-taking ability," achieving high grades in school would not therefore be as readily dismissed as simply "grade-getting ability." One has to conclude that it is academic achievement itself, and not the means by which it is measured, which is really being derogated here.

A second major theme of criticism is that which argues that predicted success in college is not an adequate measure of predicted success in life. The problem here, of course, is that people hold quite different views about what comprises "success in life" and precisely how one goes about measuring it. For some, it would clearly be a matter of income earned or otherwise accumulated. For others it would be fame on the stage or at the box office or in professional athletics. For still others it would have less to do with outward appearances and more to do with the quality of family life, being an informed and thoughtful citizen, having an appreciation for literature and art and music, or maybe just the plain old ability to detect a fallacious argument when one comes across it. While I am not at all convinced that there is not a signficant connection between a successful college experience and one or another form of life success after college, the lack of any consensus on what is deemed "success

in life" makes the argument essentially a boundaryless one and futile to pursue.

The third theme I would address here has to do with the notion of "value added." In attempting to measure educational outcomes, it strikes me as a useful, even valuable, notion. Like all notions, however, it is subject to being perverted. As a criticism of the selective colleges, it takes the form of the following argument: when colleges take "A" students and keep them "A" students, there is less value added than when colleges take "C" students and turn them into "B" students. We are asked to believe that colleges which do the latter are performing a more valuable function than those which perform the former. I happen to think this is a simplistic (and, unfortunately, a simplistically attractive) way of determining "value added" and of assessing the signficance of the contributions selective colleges make. No one can deny the obvious value added in taking a "C" student and turning him into a "B" student. But it does not follow from that, by any means, that just as much value has not been added in taking in an "A" student and graduating him an "A" student. (Never mind, for the moment, that the highly selective colleges far more often take in "A" students and graduate "B" students, adding value all the way, I might add. It doesn't require a particularly fertile imagination to see that if all the students entering a given college as freshmen had ranked in the top ten percent of their high school classes, four years later fully ninety percent of them will graduate in the bottom ninety percent of their college graduating class.) It seems to me that those colleges which enroll a relatively uniformly high achieving group of students and who treat them to a relatively rigorous, fast-paced and competitive academic program, add no less value and perform no less valuable a task than those colleges which indeed take "C" students and turn them into "B" and "A" students.

Admissions Requirements

One of the responses to the perceived inadequacies of the education some of our students have received in secondary schools has been that of suggesting that the best way to remedy such a

situation is simply to have the colleges "tighten up" their admissions requirements. The basis for such an argument is the belief that the schools will provide whatever programs are required by the colleges to ensure their students gain admission to those colleges. On the face of it, the argument appears a sound one. There is no doubt that by announcing a stiffened set of admissions requirements and a new admissions formula, beginning in 1986, the University of California anticipates its influence in the schools of this state will result in improved preparation of its entering freshmen four years from now. No doubt it will. But when one explores the matter more deeply, the issue becomes more complicated.

For instance, even in the case of UC and the schools in California, making the UC admissions standards more rigorous and providing some incentives for students to take more challenging courses still falls short, as do the admissions requirements of many colleges, in solving the problem of encouraging the schools to offer and their students to take, maximally difficult academic programs. In the first place, a minimum standard, even if moved upwards, remains a minimum standard. For many students, the minimum standard invariably becomes the maximum goal they set. In times of financial stringency, schools and teachers alike will find their pleas for additional monies to implement or strengthen already existing courses of an advanced nature rebuffed by those unable to see the merit of program offerings which go beyond the minimum required, for instance, by the major state university.

In addition, a less propitious time for colleges, whether public or independent, to set more stringent requirements for admission (assuming such requirements would in fact be requirements and not simply a Potemkin's Village through which large numbers passed by means of exceptions) is difficult to imagine. The decline in the size of the cohort group expected to graduate from our high schools in the next ten years and the rather bleak financial outlook for parents, students, and colleges alike has already created a buyer's market when it comes to college admissions.

This is not to argue that no colleges can maintain rigorous admissions standards, but the number which can easily do so is rather small (perhaps as few as ten or fifteen). Ironically, that small number may find it quite easy to maintain rigorous requirements given the relationship between such standards and what I earlier referred to as the self-selection of applicants. If I am not mistaken, a larger fraction of the academically well-prepared students will cluster themselves around a shrinking number of colleges which can manage to afford, quite literally, to maintain high admissions standards, thereby making it even more difficult to avoid even further erosion in such standards at other colleges. I think we are witnessing something along these lines already.

It has never been the case that all of our institutions of higher education have adopted similar standards for admission. Nor would I argue such should ever be the case. Our colleges are marked by a considerable diversity in terms of their missions and goals and in terms of their resources and the students they serve. Such variety and diversity is a strength of our system of higher education as a whole. But however unpopular it may be to even express such a concern, there is legitimate reason, I believe, to be worried about that fraction of our colleges which have traditionally served a disproportionate number of the academically best-prepared students and the shrinking number of <u>them</u> which are any longer in a position to maintain rigorous admissions standards.

Just as our public colleges must set relatively high minimum standards for admission, thereby exerting a marked positive influence on the largest fraction of college-bound secondary school students, so too there must be a signficant number of colleges (including some public ones) whose admissions standards reflect the maximum possible and which thereby also exert a marked positive influence, if not upon the majority of college-bound students, at least upon a signficant fraction of them.

The matter of propitiousness aside, the question of precisely how admissions requirements are to be "tightened" and administered is far from a simple one.

One man's noose is another man's necktie. It is one thing to use the term "rigorous" (as I have done throughout this statement) and quite another to achieve consensus on what it comprises. College faculties, at least, have a notoriously difficult time in reaching consensus upon distribution and/or graduation requirements in their own institutions. Too, there is the question of what standards it is reasonable to expect, both in terms of what it is possible for the schools to offer and their students to take, and in terms of the actual skills and abilities needed to successfully pursue a given academic program in college. (I suspect each of us is inclined, at least in part, to 'imagine the past and remember the future,' overestimating both our prior preparation and the knowledge and skills required to do what we now do.)

In fact, I think our concern about the preparation of our students reflects a confluence of quite different concerns. One has to do with the fact that some students clearly have not mastered the basic skills of thinking and writing clearly, and institutions of higher education find themselves having to impart to their students that which those students might reasonably have expected to obtain in high school or even prior to that. A second concern has to do, not with basic skills, but rather with the widening gap between where a given subject field leaves off when it is covered in high school and the point at which that same subject field begins in the introductory or elementary course in college. (That the relationships between are schools and our colleges are so frequently adversarial ones is at least partially explained by the fact that with few exceptions, e.g. biology and physics, and even in these cases for relatively brief periods of time, there are few meeting grounds and even fewer cooperative consultations between high school and college teachers. There are exceptions, but I think I have fairly described the rule. This is all the more striking in that there are clearly instances in which a given subject is far better taught in the senior year of high school than in the freshman year in college.)

And a third concern, of a more general nature, is that of a quite unselfserving nature, namely the recognition by colleges that given the not insignificant costs entailed in receiving a college education at this time, students owe it to themselves to come to college prepared to make the most of the education offered there.

When we talk about "tightening" college admissions standards, we have in mind one or another , or some combination, of these concerns. Let us assume that the various colleges could come to some agreement on what were reasonable admissions requirements for entrance to their respective institutions. The question is then how specific and detailed such requirements need to be. Take Stanford, for instance. We do not have a specific set of admissions requirements at present, e.g. specific courses to be taken or a specific number of years of a given subject to be taken, or even a specific grade point average or specific minimum score result to be obtained on one of the national standardized tests. Unless one was familiar with the kinds of students who apply for admission or with the kinds of students who gain admission, one might well ask how we can have any standards at all in the absence of specific admissions requirements. Our reply to such a question, of course, is that our admissions standards are implied by the academic preparation and abilities of the students we admit and given that we receive a large number of applications from very well prepared students and relatively few applications from poorly prepared students we may assume that our admissions standards are well known. In other words, the self-selection of our applicants rests more on fact than on whim. While I believe this to be the case, such a stance might justifiably be criticized as depending far too heavily on word-of-mouth and, at the same time, as an unwillingness to play a leadership role. Our Memorandum is an appropriate and corrective measure in this regard, I believe.

I have not traced the history of college admissions requirements, but my experience over almost two decades in admissions leads me to suggest that at some point (at least two decades ago) the admissions requirements set by the selective colleges were in many schools adopted as the graduation requirements for students in the college preparatory programs, thereby rendering the college requirements somewhat rendundant.

It would doubtless be difficult to pinpoint precisely just when the slippage occurred which has resulted in the kinds of issues with which the Commission is now dealing and with the particular question of the role college admissions requirements (or dilution of same) played in the perceived decline in the quality of the preparation of entering students. Surely it did not occur overnight, and just as surely there was no single cause.

Over the course of the past two decades, all sorts of intervening factors may be said to have contributed to a weakening of the linkage between colleges and schools. In that period of time the schools found themselves charged with all sorts of responsibilities in addition to that of providing our young with an education. In those same decades, the schools also became the proving grounds for just about any and all theories which purported to tell us what students really ought to know and how they really ought to be taught. The application of standards was attacked as "elitist" and, therefore, indefensible. Teachers frequently abdicated the authority to determine course content and in some cases no life experience was deemed unworthy of academic credit. Educational experiments abounded. And even the professional societies of teachers found consensus on the proper bounds and goals of their disciplines had all but dissolved among a flurry of self-criticism and self-doubt.

New disciplines did arrive (e.g., computer science) and added to the competition, in an ever-shrinking school day, for the students' time and attention. Signficant developments did take place in one or another field of science, making it increasingly difficult for teachers and textbooks alike to keep up. And subjects like history, alas, found it as hard as ever to incorporate each passing (and "relevant") decade into a constant, or even shrinking, number of hours in the school year. It would have been difficult for the schools to ride out what was a stormy couple of decades under the most ideal of conditions, but it did not help matters that the colleges themselves no longer provided a due north position on the educational compass. They were undergoing storms of their own.

Lastly, in just the past few years many schools and entire school systems have been buffeted by severe financial constraints in one or another part of the country resulting in a number of undesirable consequences, the most signficant of which is the problem of recruiting and holding onto qualified teachers. In what seems to be a relatively short period of time, there has been a signficant decline in the morale of the best of our teachers and an equally ominous decline in the general academic abilities of those who now indicate an interest in entering the teaching profession. Even before the advent of Proposition 13 (and its equivalent in other parts of the country), school bonds failed to gain passage in one community after another as the surrounding populations had fewer and fewer children enrolled in the schools and therefore felt less of a stake in the welfare of such a critical institution. The cuts have been felt in other ways: shorter school days, layoffs of teachers according to seniority status rather than teaching ability, the dropping of classes with relatively small enrollments (disproportionately hitting the foreign language departments). And finally, the schools (not unlike the larger society of which they are part) became the battlegrounds of single-interest groups, as each part fought to hang on to its share of budget.

Had only a few such developments mentioned above taken place, the linkage which had been previously forged between college admissions requirements and the academic programs of our schools would have been considerably strained. That most of these developments occurred over a relatively short period of time rendered such a linkage all but impossible to maintain.

Just as there are some colleges which have been able to maintain relatively rigorous admissions standards, so too there are many secondary schools which have managed to remain excellent in just about every respect. But for such colleges and such schools, the maintenance of such standards and such quality has come partly at the expense of of other colleges and other schools. The chain of events is not hard to trace. Schools with inadequate resources and programs lose many of their best students, the loss of such pace-setters compounded by the

loss of parents with an interest in quality education. Losing good students and interested parents can lower the morale of the school and its staff and, in turn, make it more difficult than ever to recruit the best among the new crop of teachers. In some cases, a downward spiral is set in motion from which it becomes increasingly difficult to recover.

I happen to believe that the increase in applications to the independent secondary schools in the past few years has far more to do with parents' concerns over the perceived declining quality of the education in the public schools than with concerns over integration or bussing. Indeed, the move to high-priced secondary education is far greater than is indicated by merely looking at the application increase at the independent secondary schools. Many parents spend the equivalent of the price of independent secondary schooling by purchasing homes and moving to areas where the public schools enjoy a quality reputation, thereby spending in house mortgages that which other parents spend in tuition at private schools. That such moves reflect far more than mere social snobbery or affluence alone is suggested by the number of parents, many of them with modest incomes and many from minority backgrounds, who have enrolled their children in parochial schools. In fact, I believe I could make a case that the parochial schools <u>are</u> the independent schools for minority students. Certainly it has been my experience that a significant number of the best-prepared minority students come from such schools.

Having said all of this, it may be understandable why I am ambivalent about this notion that the key to improving the academic programs and performance of students in our schools is a tightening of college admissions standards. I find myself in favor of the notion in principle and skeptical of it in practical terms. (Hearing myself utter those words, I am uncomfortably reminded of the person about whom it was said, " he had plenty of principles; he just never let any of them get in his way.") My thinking on the matter goes as follows:

a. External forces in an educational sequence consitute less than an ideal foundation upon which to build and maintain educational programs of high quality, whether such forces be the influence of college admissions requirements on secondary school programs or professional school requirements upon college programs. Such forces invariably invite educational hypocrisy, if not outright dishonesty: inflated grades, teaching to tests, and course titles and descriptions bearing little resemblance to actual content. While I am not unaware that students, like the rest of us, may achieve a fine education for the wrong reasons (I think it was Wayne Booth who once pointed out that while he admits to having been motivated by the desire to achieve good grades, he managed to learn a lot in the course of doing so), to motivate students largely by dangling passage to the next level in front of them invites many of them to miss a good education along the way.

b. We are now at a time when many colleges are competing avidly for students. Even if many of them could be persuaded to set modestly rigorous admissions standards, I doubt many of them would be in a position to adhere to them. And while I believe there ought not to be rules to which reasonable exceptions cannot be made, I also believe there ought not be rules (or standards) which are honored largely in the breech.

c. One of the strengths of our system of higher education has been its willingness to seek out students of talent, whatever their socioeconomic backgrounds or circumstances. For most students, their educational opportunities at the elementary and secondary school levels are determined by the block they were born on. Many students, whatever their soicioeconomic backgrounds, find themselves in schools which simply no longer offer a decent mathematics course, a third year of a foreign language, or even more than one foreign language, adequate labratory facilities for the sciences, or teachers adequately trained in the subject matter they teach. High ability students in such areas would be handicapped in college admissions, I think, less by the unwillingness of colleges to make exceptions to their requirements than by the students' reluctance to apply to college with specific requirements they know they don't meet in the first place. A similar thing happens now when students use the costs of the colleges to decide whether to apply, frequently failing to even investigate whether they might receive financial aid to attend one of the more expensive colleges.

d. I think the idea of "quality" invariably suffers as it passes through the body politic. While I believe in acting on principle and while I also believe in the value of symbolic acts, on occasion, were any signficant number of colleges to institute rigorous admissions criteria and to hold to them, such a move at this time would place many of our secondary schools between a rock and a hard place: between colleges with admissions standards which many of their students cannot possibly meet at present and a lack of both the necessary funds and the ability to hire and fire teachers based on performance, without either of which they cannot possibly provide their students with a fair chance of meeting those rigorous admissions standards.

e. If tighter admissions standards are to be set, a great deal of thought must be given to the form they take. At the present time, such requirements generally take the form of specified subjects to be taken, specified numbers of courses in subjects, and specified achievement levels (grades) to be attained. Some of the inherent weaknesses of requirements stated in this form have been suggested earlier: course content, grade inflation, lack of uniform grading standards not only from school to school but from teacher to teacher in the same school. For example, a student with two years of French at one school may have learned twice as much French as a student who took three years of French at another school. Such circumstances are the kind of thing with which college admissions officers must wrestle constantly (in the absence of perfect knowledge) and lead many of them to be skeptical about the fair implementation of admissions requirements likely to be stated in terms of course titles, number of years studied, and grades achieved. Ideally what most of us would like is some way to measure outcomes, what students have actually learned from the programs they have taken, but I think that is far in the future. (The College Board is presently engaged, together with college and school teachers, in attempting to derive a relatively widespread consensus on just such outcomes. The effort is called Project EQuality and it seems promising.) While a very small number of the highly selective colleges might place greater reliance upon such examinations as the College Board Achievement tests than now do, greater use of such tests in the immediate future would, I am afraid, place those students who find themselves in less than first-rate secondary schools at an even greater disadvantage.

f. I think the notion of specific and rigorous admissions requirements presumes on the part of college faculties (which set such requirements) a consensus which would in fact be difficult to achieve. Far more knowledgable about the academic programs in their own colleges than they are about the programs in the high schools, college faculties nevertheless find it difficult to reach agreement

about either the distribution requirements or the graduation requirements in their own institutions. It is one thing to arrive at a policy which is based upon a combination of educational ideals, pragmatism, and accomodation of quite different interests within a single institution; it is quite another to put that off at the intersection of two institutions, or types of institutions, at different levels in the educational process. I have witnessed debates among professors of considerable intellect and good will over the question of whether, where requirements are of a zero-sum nature, it doesn't make as much sense to have a computer science graduation requirement for all students as to have a foreign language graduation requirement for them. I cannot think that debates of this type will ever be fully resolved to everyone's satisfaction. I do think that any consensus which might now be achieved regarding precisely what kind of preparation a given student ought to bring to college is bound to be far more fragile and tentative than that which characterized the agreements over admissions requirements several decades ago.

g. I do not rule out the role which tightened admissions requirements might play in strengthening the academic preparation our students receive in the schools, but at the moment I am inclined to want to treat such as a move of last resort. At the stage where we now find ourselves, I think colleges should strongly recommend and support academic excellence on the part of the schools and their students. They should attempt to persuade and to show by example. And they should commit the resources at their disposal toward positioning themselves and the secondary schools so that once again we might find ourselves with college admissions requirements and high school college preparatory graduation requirements which are essentially congruent with each other.

What I am suggesting, then, is that raising admissions requirements, even were it more practicable than I now think it is for colleges to do, will not necessarily result in the raising of academic standards. I am clearly in favor of raising standards at all levels of education and particularly those at the secondary school level. Some of the ways in which to effect such fundamental changes are implied in much of what I have said above: allow our schools to focus most of their resources and energies on academic programs, drastically improve the conditions of the teachers, seek ways in which to balance out both legitimate seniority and legitimate quality considerations in the hiring of teachers, create some sort of program (on the model of the Woodrow Wilson Fellowships) to attract to school teaching a much higher percentage of our most able

college graduates, urge our schools of education to place increased emphasis upon the mastering of subject matter on the part of their graduates who enter into teaching, and promote widespread and ongoing contact and consultation between the teachers in our schools and the teachers in our colleges, particularly where both share a given subject field in common.

In addition, the schools should be encouraged to identify someone on their staffs to act as an advocate to the students (and their parents) on behalf of a challenging academic program. I am also inclined to suggest that some of the national standardized tests which many students now take only at the end of their junior year or at the begnning of their senior year in high school be taken at a much earlier time so that the results mightly more reasonably be used in a diagnostic way. (There is always the risk, of course, that students would be "typed" or "classified" by such test results, but that risk exists whether the tests are given in the ninth grade or in the twelfth. I think it is outweighed by the opportunity it would give students and teachers alike to determine strengths which could be enhanced and weaknesses which could be overcome.) College guidance must also be undertaken at a much earlier time in a student's high school career than is now commonly the case, and students must be encouraged from the beginning of the ninth grade on to always act and make choices in such a manner as to maximize, not narrow, their options at graduation. Lastly, means must be sought by which to encourage ambition and to raise the level of expectations of our students and of those who teach them.

My hope is that college admissions requirements and high school college preparatory graduation requirements would move in tandem rather than have the former pull the latter.

Minority Students

If the situation in our schools is not what it can or should be for many of our students, it is even more dismal for a large fraction of students from minority backgrounds, who by virtue of the block they were born on, all too frequently find themselves in some of the

schools with the fewest resources, the lowest morale, the least challenging academic programs, and little encouragement to hold high expectations.

Some colleges, particularly the traditionally Black colleges, have long comitted their resources to raising the expectations and educating such students. It was not until the early sixties, for some colleges, and the late sixties for most others, that programs were put into place to seek out and to enroll larger numbers of disadvantaged, primarily minority, students. Such programs were by no means solely a matter of enrolling students whose admission could be considered academically risky. At least part of the increased enrollment of minority students at such colleges comprised very able and well-prepared young men and women who either did not know about such colleges, or were never encouraged to consider them, or did not believe they'd be welcome at them. Seeking out such students was less a matter of lowering normal admissions standards than it was of communicating an interest or raising expectations. But in many cases, it was a matter of waiving normal admissions criteria, where there was evidence such students would be able to make up, within a relatively short period of time, whatever preparation for a given college had been missing in their secondary school program. And, in all frankness, there were cases where academic risk-taking was clearly involved.

What do things look like in 1982? Disappointing, I think. It is my opinion that without fundamental and wholesale changes in the schools most minority students find they must attend, little improvement in current minority enrollments in college and little improvement in the relatively high attrition rates (particularly in the two-year colleges and in some of the mass public institutions) can be expected. Minority applications at the selective colleges have reached a plateau even as the fraction of secondary school students who are from minority backgrounds has, in many parts of the country, increased. The recommendations I have suggested above appear to me to apply twice over to those schools in which the majority of our minority students are enrolled. The selective colleges will continue to vigorously maintain programs to enroll more minority students. And while theirs have not been, for the most part,

back-door operations, they cannot ignore the the possibility of the long-range negative consequences of continuing to waive normal admissions critera. As one observer has put it, " if the back door is kept open, what incentive is there to prepare to go through the front door?" While I don't think the criticism implied in that remark applies to the minority recruitment programs at the selective colleges, there is an element of truth in it which all of us must keep in mind. And in those colleges where there is not only a back door but where it turns out to be a revolving door, I think it should be taken very much to heart. A more major concern, however, is the frequency with which one hears spokesmen who, purportedly having the best interests of minority students in mind, derogate academic achievement (and the means by which it is measured) itself. Such derogation takes any number of forms, but in whatever form it appears it is my opinion that in both the short and the long run, it is distinctly a disservice to the minority students everywhere.

One last comment regarding minority students. One would hardly gather from the manner in which minority admissions is discussed, written about, or treated in the media that some of the brightest, best prepared students admitted to our colleges in a given year are minority students. Much has been written and researched about why minority students fail. Pathology attracts our interest in a way health does not. We might well learn more in the long run were time and resources spent studying those who succeed, particularly those who have overcome signficant obstacles in order to do so. The number of such cases is surely sufficient to warrant more attention than we have heretofore given them.

I hope these observations, comments, and opinions have been helpful.